

Photos by Wesley Hitt for USA TODAY

Preaching what he's practicing: Mike Huckabee, 48, has lost 105 pounds in a little more than a year, after he was diagnosed with diabetes. "I was the poster child for everything that was wrong," he says. Now he hopes his Healthy Arkansas plan will help get the people of his state on the same path to good health.

Governor's state of health

Arkansas' Huckabee is on a mission

By Kathy Kiely
USA TODAY

LITTLE ROCK — Mike Huckabee is used to winning elections. But these days, he's proudest about what he has lost.

Since June 2003, the 48-year-old Arkansas governor has undergone a jaw-dropping metamorphosis: He has trimmed 105 pounds off his 5-foot-11 frame. As a tale of personal transformation, that would be remarkable enough.

But Huckabee isn't satisfied with his individual accomplishment. He's trying to turn it into a public health crusade.

Last month, Huckabee unveiled the Healthy Arkansas initiative and said he intends to make it a priority of his final two years as governor. His goal: to turn around a state that perennially ranks as one of the unhealthiest in the country by getting his citizens to exercise more, watch their weight and quit smoking. According to figures compiled by the Centers for Disease Control, nearly 8% of Arkansians have diabetes, nearly 22% are considered obese, and 26% smoke.

Alarmed by a growing weight problem among children, Arkansas this year became the first to require schools to measure students' body mass index, a formula that gauges excess weight, and send data home to parents. Huckabee signed the measure into law while he was on his diet.

The governor, a Republican, sees it as a way to get control of his state health care costs, which he says are being pushed up by higher-than-average rates of obesity, diabetes and tobacco use.

"We are getting killed," he says.

Leading the way

Until recently, Huckabee didn't feel he was in a position to make an issue of the way citizens' poor choices were driving up the state's health bills. "How could I get up there and say, 'People, we've got to do better' when I was the poster child for everything that was wrong?" he says. "I've always believed leaders don't ask others to do what they're unwilling to do."

Now a leaner, fitter Huckabee is pushing the state health bureaucracy to come up with innovative ways to encourage healthy living. One idea he's floating: letting state employees who don't use all their sick days take them as vacation.

Arkansas has begun offering nutrition counseling and smoking-cessation aids, including the nicotine patch, to Medicaid recipients and state employees. In the governor's office, workers are offered "walking breaks" instead of smoking breaks. "We'd rather you be a healthy employee instead of giving you time to go out and kill yourself," Huckabee says. He hopes the practice will spread throughout state government and, eventually, to the private sector.

Huckabee says he was scared skinny: A year ago, he was diagnosed with diabetes, a disease he watched both of his parents suffer with. So he knew the complications he'd



Arkansas governor's transformation by the numbers:

JUNE 2003 | JUNE 2004

Casual clothes size

XXXL

L

Neck size

18

16

Suit size

54 regular

42 regular

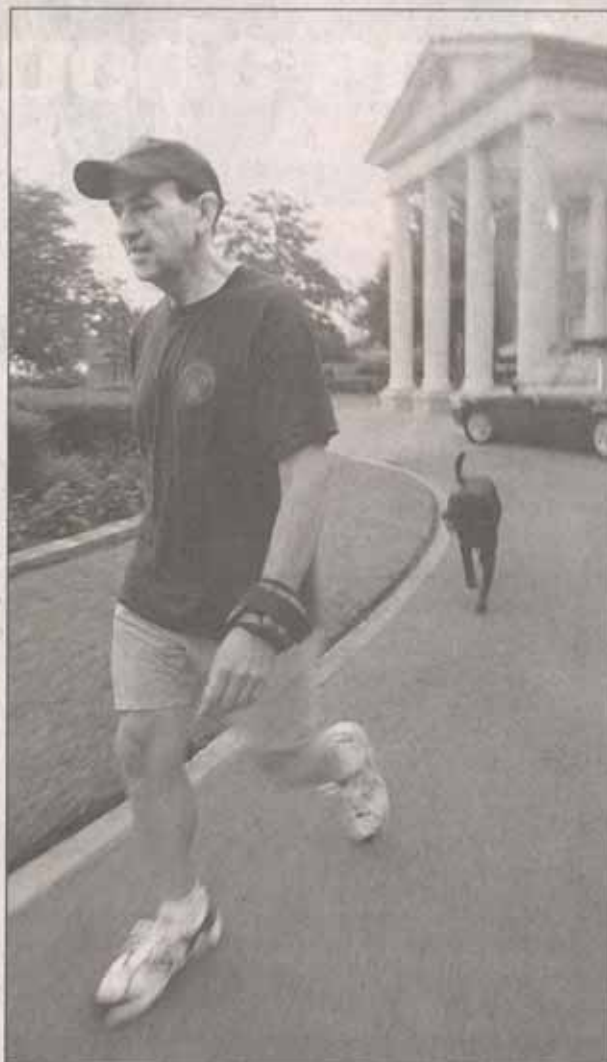
Waist size

48

35



Photos by AP



On the move, and early: Huckabee rises at 4:30 a.m. every day for a walk with his dog, Jet. Then he runs 2 or 3 miles.

be facing: vision problems, the possibility of losing a toe or even a foot, a potential early death.

"I thought, 'Man, this is so stupid,'" Huckabee recalls. "I did this to myself."

Having yo-yo'd up and down the scale for years, Huckabee says he was "desperate." At the recommendation of a friend, he enrolled in a weight-loss program run by the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences.

The results have been gratifying: At his last physical, his doctors pronounced him free of any signs of diabetes.

The UAMS program, which puts patients on a liquid diet of nutrition supplements before reintroducing them to healthy eating, was expensive, Huckabee acknowledges. But he says the money he's saving by avoiding diabetes medication makes it worth it. It costs at least \$500 to enroll in the 15-week program, plus about \$60 a week for dietary supplements. Program di-

rector Philip Kern blames "piddling reimbursements" from private and federal insurance programs. "Unfortunately, we have to make it a cash program, which puts it out of reach for poor people," he says.

Fitness comes first

Kern, an endocrinologist who also works for the Little Rock Veteran's Administration, says insurance companies willingly reimburse patients who treat diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol with drugs but not those who opt for a weight-loss program — even though diet changes and exercise can produce dramatic results. Huckabee shares Kern's frustration. The governor is using his clout to push for changes at his state's insurance department.

"The health care system is really designed to reward you for being unhealthy," Huckabee says. "If you are a healthy person and work hard to be healthy, there are no benefits." He's hoping to come up with financial and other incentives to change that.

A Baptist minister as well as a politician, Huckabee sees a spiritual aspect to his makeover. "From a faith perspective, I knew I was not being a good steward of my body."

Unable to complete the one-third-of-a-mile lap around the grounds of the Arkansas governor's mansion a year ago without becoming winded, Huckabee now gets up at 4:30 every morning to exercise. He warms up by walking a mile or so with his black Labrador, Jet, and then runs 2 or 3 miles.

He tops that off by riding an exercise bicycle for 30 minutes while he reads the newspaper. Three times a week, he lifts weights.

Over the July Fourth weekend, Huckabee completed his first footrace: a 5K that he finished in under 29 minutes.

He's eating lean meats, lots of fruit and salads. Eliminating highly processed foods, such as potato chips and white bread, has ended some of his most dangerous cravings, Huckabee says: "I actually would prefer to have an apple than a Snickers bar. I never thought I'd get there."

Although he's not the least bit shy about announcing how much weight he's lost, Huckabee doesn't want to give his before-and-after weight. He says that not focusing on the scale has been a key to his success. Unlike every time he has dieted before, he says, "I don't have a weight goal. I have a health and fitness goal."

"If you get healthy and fit, the weight will take care of itself."

What's good for the gov

Philip Kern, director of the University of Arkansas weight loss program that Gov. Mike Huckabee followed, says the key to losing weight is reducing fat and adding fiber. His program provides plenty of room for patient choice. Female patients, Kern says, tend to prefer "quasi-vegetarian" diets that are high in complex carbohydrates. Men tend to go for the protein. Here's a sample of one of Huckabee's typical daily menus:

Breakfast

Eggs
Bacon
Fruit

Midmorning snack

Apple or strawberries

Lunch

Salad or lean turkey breast

Midafternoon snack

An apple and small portion of cheese or nuts

Dinner

Broiled, baked or grilled meat or fish

Steamed green vegetables

Salad and fruit

Huckabee never puts dressing on salads. Instead, he uses salsa. He sweetens coffee, tea and fruit with Splenda, a sugar substitute. He does not use refined sugar.